

**Case History: Detroiters Working for Environmental Justice**

- **Describe the impacted community (population, neighborhood, general statistics, history, etc).**

Detroit is home to 87% of the controlled and uncontrolled polluting facilities. In fact, Detroit is the preferred location for permitting the most undesirable environmental facilities for the entire state. Over 80% of Detroit's population is African American, 3% Latina and other minorities. According to the 2000 census, Detroit ranks number one as being the most segregated city in America.

- **What are/were the problems affecting the community?**

Unfortunately, this trend continues. After doing research in 1995, Dr. Bunyan Bryan, Professor at University of Michigan and Elaine Hockman of Wayne State University determined that Southeast Michigan is the hotspot for environmental problems in the state. Detroit has its share of Brownfields with a minimum estimated at 40,000. While pollution on land is an issue in Southeast Michigan air pollution is equally disturbing. Wayne County fail to meet the Clean Air Act standards on a regular basis. Health disparities for Detroit residents continue to be a challenge. For instance, African Americans in Detroit are five times more likely to be diagnosed with asthma compared to their white counterparts. In addition, Detroit's children rank among the top five in lead poisoning in the nation.

- **What partnerships were formed to address the problems and challenges?**

Michigan Environmental Justice Coalition (MEJC)  
Detroit Urban Research Center (URC)

- **What were the major challenges the community faced or faces in overcoming the problems?**

Environmental health impacts remain a major challenge. Today, it is much easier for policy makers and community leaders to blame the victim rather than associated disparities with environmental exposures. Influential industry leaders are very effective in convincing the public that environmental protection equates to job jeopardy. And, finally, a barrier to these problems is the continual need to convince the regular resident that they can do something about these problems.

- **How did the community overcome the challenges? If the community wasn't able to address the challenges, what were the impacts on the project? How did the project move forward?**

In one instance in our efforts to convince Henry Ford Health System to shut down its medical waste incinerator, we were able to present credible information that provided a cost effective strategy for eliminating incineration as a preferred waste

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management tool. This proved to be very effective. As a community we were seen as a resource not just an opponent.

In another instance, through the URC we have been able to produce good data that supports our position regarding diesel and truck traffic. Although, we have not been able to stop the proposed inter-modal freight terminal it has been effective in stalling the process. In doing so, the Michigan Department of Transportation has gone back to the drawing table many times and returned with new plans that reduced the proposed number of trucks from a high of 16,000 per day to 2,000 per, It is our hope to stop the proposed project altogether. There are very little public benefits.

- **What tools or methods did the community use that is transferable to other communities facing similar issues?**

Community based participatory research is a very effective approach to addressing the problems we face. If done correctly, it has great ability to impact public policy. In addition, credible information and good organizing strategies work well.

- **What were the major successes in the eyes of the community?**

The best success really was the shutting down of the Medical Waste incinerator. The community took this on with many obstacles but overcame them all in a relatively short time.

**Community Leader Bio Sketch:** Donele Wilkins has over two decades of experience in occupational and environmental health as an educator, consultant, trainer, administrator and advocate. In 1994, she co-founded and currently serves as the Executive Director of Detroiters Working for Environmental Justice (DWEJ), a non-profit organization addressing urban environmental issues in the City of Detroit. Ms. Wilkins has assisted several community organizations and put them on the correct path toward increasing their capacity to transform their communities. With her leadership, DWEJ was able to shut down the Henry Ford Hospital Medical Waste Incinerator. Donele sits on The Detroit Brownfield Redevelopment Authority, Southeast Michigan Council of Governments- transportation advisory committee, Founder and Co-Chair of the National Black Environmental Justice Network, Colin Powell Academy board of education and many other committees and forums.